

Frank Press: Carter's Man on Science

Science adviser will set new directions in energy, resources and health research

BY JOHN H. DOUGLAS

Last week, Presidential science adviser Frank Press appeared before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation for a hearing on his confirmation as Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). Earlier, he was interviewed by SCIENCE NEWS staff member John H. Douglas. This article is based on information from the interview and the hearing. Some first impressions about the man himself are presented in an accompanying article (see box). Although not yet confirmed, Press has been actively working at his new job for almost a month (SN: 2/19/77, p. 119 and 3/2/77, p. 215).

"It's a whole new ballgame," Frank Press answers quietly but hopefully to a question about energy policy. His answers to other questions echo the same sentiment. From the role of science as a contributor to foreign policy to the need for federal coordination of DNA research, Press is already actively engaged in creating study committees, formulating policy decisions for the President's consideration, and getting to know the agency heads who must carry out these policies. For a man so recently removed from academic life as a geophysicist, he seems to have his priorities and goals remarkably well in order:

- Foreign affairs. "I think the area of science and technology as a component of foreign policy is going to be very important." Particularly for the Third World this component "can make an enormous contribution to stability and quality of life."

- Industrial R&D. "I would like to monitor the trends of R&D investment to see if we are mortgaging the future for the sake of the present, by not having adequate basic research, which will end up as new products 8 or 10 years from now."

- Formation of a new Department of Energy. Press says his office will have a major input to the President in offering technical advice on establishing the new department.

- Government regulation. "I'm concerned that regulations are having an effect on our ability to do research. The first step is to find out if this is a real concern, and if so, to see what might be done about



Press relaxes in his office overlooking the White House elms. President Carter has given him more responsibility than any science adviser has had for years.

John H. Douglas

it at the policy-making level."

- Natural resources. "Is our national program in exploration for new materials, for looking for substitutes, for conservation and reprocessing and recycling . . . adequate?" In some areas he believes not and OSTP is already involved in trying to determine the adequacy of uranium reserves.

- University research. "I am concerned about the health of the universities, which represent some of the finest research institutions in the world." At some, he says, facilities may be outmoded and the faculty is aging, while young scientists have trouble finding positions.

- Health. "Health is an area in which I am not an expert. I do, however, believe that there are some emerging needs that deserve my attention. . . . Of these, I believe, research into environmental health may be the most important."

Press believes that the general health of basic research in the United States is good, but he is less certain about applied research and development. "There are important things to look into in terms of the relationship between . . . the federal government and private industry. In

[these] areas, adequacy is a function of the effectiveness of policy more than it is a question of direct funding."

He favors a "diversified, mixed strategy" for developing new energy technologies. Although he did not participate in the decision to slow the breeder reactor program (see p. 244), he says the best policy here is to pursue research into the breeder as an energy option for the future. "The first real deep, searching probe of what our energy policy should be is now underway," he says, and alternative technologies will have a fresh chance to be considered.

When asked in the interview whether he thinks the present level of funding is adequate for earthquake research, his own speciality, he said it would be sufficient to utilize "the best people" in the research. But then he launched into a discussion of what may become a major new thrust in the field—the need for international cooperation. Too few earthquakes occur in any one country to build the needed case histories on which to base reliable predictions. Quake prediction can be accomplished, he stresses, but "the only way is to pool the resources of the

world." He intends to look into ways for bringing about the necessary international agreements.

One problem likely to face Press as he pursues his ambitious goals will be limitations on staff and funding. He told the Senate committee that for the moment he intends to appoint only one of the four possible associate directors for OSTP—to handle the biomedical area. When former scientist-astronaut and now U.S. senator Harrison Schmitt (R-N.M.) expressed concern over this decision, Press replied that he would see what he could do with just a professional staff and then "if we do a good job but are overworked," he might consider asking the President for a larger number of associate directors.

Press told SCIENCE NEWS there would be three broad types of tasks that would be appropriate for his office to handle: Those areas cutting across the responsibilities of several government agencies, those in which the President requested him to be an independent source of advice and those in which he might exercise some oversight. Because of its limitations, he said, OSTP must take an eclectic approach in selecting problems to consider.

In one area of particular interest he has refused to be pinned down about what the role of his office will be: national security affairs. He says he has had "productive, positive" meetings with Defense Secretary Harold Brown and national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and that some new OSTP committees have been formed in this area, but he will not elaborate further.

While confirmation by the Senate seems assured, the hearing revealed a new sensitivity to conflict of interest that may make it harder for academics, like Press, to be drawn into government. Schmitt questioned Press closely about his decision to merely take a leave of absence from MIT, rather than resigning outright. Somewhat taken aback, Press replied that such a procedure has been traditional and promised that in any matter involving MIT directly "I would be scrupulous in removing myself from the decision."

Schmitt admitted that taking a leave of absence has been an accepted tradition, but he argued that the Senate's new push for "ethics" and the President's own recent announcements on the subject may make complete separation necessary. Press replied that "if this committee insists I resign [from MIT], I will resign." At that point Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), who had introduced Press, interjected that a resignation shouldn't be necessary. But the basic issue remains unresolved.

With no line authority, Press will succeed or fail by how well he convinces the President and the heads of "line" agencies that he has the facts on his side. To that end he has announced intention to form *ad hoc* groups of scientists and engineers to look into various specific issues.

Impressions of a soft-spoken 'content' man

The word one most often hears to characterize Frank Press is "soft-spoken," but the term's full significance is likely to be lost until one actually meets him. For Press, the expression indicates not only a tone of voice, but more important, a whole attitude: an uncharacteristic modesty for a Washington bureaucrat (even a new one) and an uncharacteristic lack of pedantry for a life-long academic.

He may boom HELLO to an old friend on the phone, but ask him a thought-provoking question and he'll lapse into silence altogether. His cigar flickers out and one can hear the stormy wind in the trees outside his window overlooking the White House. He only begins again when he seems to have conceived the answer in all its themes and variations, as Mozart claimed to do with his symphonies.

When they finally come, his answers are forthright, conveying an overall optimism about the potential of his new job, yet admitting his own weaknesses. Unlike his predecessor, he attends all Cabinet meetings and has personal access to the President, both good reasons for optimism. Since he admittedly knows little about the biomedical field, he says he is concentrating much of his effort at the moment to finding an associate director to take charge of that area.

Although Press has been a government consultant for years, he has had little opportunity to learn his way through the murky bureaucratic politics that lies submerged beneath the stormy surface of daily Washington activity. Therefore, much of his time in his first, unofficial month at his job has been spent in building a network of personal contacts. Of this time he says: "I've learned more in this past month than almost at any time in my life. And my first impression simply is that if you have something to say, and it's significant and well-documented, then you will be listened to. And you can have an impact."

Specifically, he has apparently been able to spend some profitable time getting to know his boss, President Jimmy Carter: "He's extremely intelligent and knowledgeable. In areas, for example, such as energy, he really understands the technology to a very high level—the level of the experts. . . . In my interactions with him, on any technical question that comes up, it shows he's had a technical background."

Carter, says Press, is particularly concerned about natural resources: "It may be one of the reasons he picked an earth scientist to begin with." Thus one of the top priorities, for OSTP, will be to review the national program of resource conservation, discovery and reprocessing, to prevent the occurrence of shortages similar to that following the oil embargo. On this and other matters, Carter appears ready to hear his science adviser's counsel. "He's approachable as long as I don't waste his time." The idea of Press wasting anybody's time seems unthinkable from the start.

Unfortunately, within recent memory, there was a period when the White House attitude seemed to be that any talk of science was a waste of time. Press's predecessor, H. Guyford Stever, will probably be best remembered for his patience and tenacity in rescuing the science adviser post from the shambles left when President Nixon disbanded the White House science office altogether. Stever eventually gained enough influence with President Ford to reverse a decade-long decline in constant dollar funding for basic research. But I gained the impression from his last press conference that he was leaving government with a sigh of relief.

With Press not yet even confirmed, any judgments about what specific changes his appointment will mean for the course of American science will have to be postponed. But already a change of pace and a growing optimism can be discerned. This impression is best conveyed for me by recalling a conversation I had with a White House aide shortly after the collapse of the Nixon Administration. I quoted a statement dealing with science policy made by a leading government figure. "Oh," replied the aide sarcastically, dismissing my question out of hand, "he's not a *content* person."

On several subsequent occasions, this has proved a useful distinction to keep in mind. And if I would add one other word to "soft-spoken" to characterize Frank Press, it would have to be this: He is the quintessential "content" person, one bound to make a significant mark so long as Washington remains willing to listen to someone who "has something to say."

—J.H.D.

He does not, however, favor establishment of a standing committee like the old President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC). "The objective of the science adviser in bringing his advice to the Presi-

dent," says Press, "should be to present careful, reasoned and analytical scientific and technological analyses." The question is now, will that advice be listened to? □